

# HEADSHIP AND SUBMISSION

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1 Corinthians 11:2-16

## Introduction:

It is quite a few weeks since we last looked into this epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. We have arrived this morning at 1 Corinthians 11. I feel kind of like what John MacArthur said when he preached on this passage over 40 years ago. He said, *“I tried to delay it as long as I could but finally I just really ran against the wall, and I couldn’t think of anything else to get out of it, so here we are.”*

Seven weeks ago we wrapped up a major section of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians – chapters 8-10. It was a section devoted to the discussion of our liberty in Christ and how that should look in our day-to-day lives. Related to that was the danger of liberty becoming license to get involved in things that would lead us to sin. The bottom line that we found in Paul’s conclusion is this – *read 10:30-11:1*. I wrapped up that message with this statement:

*“If our constant longing is to be like Jesus, and our desire is that everything we do be for the glory of God, then we will have no problem determining whether some activity or behavior is appropriate for us as Christians. When our desire is to please Him, the desire for earthly things fades.”*

Well, that was 7 weeks ago. We were away for 3 weeks. When we got back we did a service focused on the history and the heart of Village Missions. The next Sunday was Thanksgiving so I gave a message connected to that. Then last Sunday Justin spoke. Now, here we are. It seems I can’t avoid chapter 11 any longer.

Let me begin this morning with a few background thoughts and observations regarding the text we have before us.

1. The way in which this passage should be interpreted has been a matter of serious debate for many years and what is said this morning is certainly not the final word on the subject. There will still be dissenting views long after I am gone from the scene.

2. It is never easy to separate that which is based on culture from that which is fact, based on God’s eternal principles. But we are going to try to do that this morning, at least to some extent. You may not agree with me on all of this, but that is okay.
3. Concerning the content of the text itself, the issue of headship, and of structures of authority and submission to that authority have always been the subject of great debate. It is not my intent to get into a debate but to try to look at what the Word says. If we can see and hear God’s mind in this and submit to his authority, we will have accomplished our purpose today.

So, having said all of that, let us investigate the text. I want to begin with the idea of ...

## Keeping the Traditions v. 2

*Read v. 2* – Note that this is the first mention of any commendation from Paul for the church in Corinth. Through all of the previous chapters, there was no word of praise, but only correction.

Here he commends them for the fact that they remember him – they hold him in regard and look to his instruction as a guide. He commends them for holding to the traditions (NIV – teachings; AV – ordinances).

Even though he has had to correct them on many things, and will continue to do so, it is clear that Paul did not want to weary them with only negativity. And so he commends them for keeping the traditions or teaching that he had given them. He does not elaborate on what he was specifically referring to. Perhaps it was the ordinances of the Lord’s supper and baptism. They were faithful in keeping those things, even though there was much to be corrected regarding their observance of the Lord’s supper as we will see later in this chapter.

Perhaps he was commending them for the way they were adhering to the very instruction which is a part of this section – his standards concerning head coverings for women. If that is the case, it would seem that even though they were observing his instruction, he wanted to be sure that they understood the reasons behind the instructions. It would seem that they may have asked a question about this issue.

Whatever the case, Paul wanted to reassure them that he was aware of their desire to hold to the traditions and teachings that he and the other apostles had given them. But he's not through. There is something he wants them to understand. And it is something we need to understand.

## Understanding the Principle v. 3

*Read v. 3* – This is where everything seems to go sideways. Our culture balks at the kind of language that Paul uses here. But I believe that if we understand correctly the principle that Paul is presenting we can then go on to understand the context of the following verses.

The issue of whether or not women should wear a head covering is not the primary issue here. The issue is the structure of authority that God has established. So before we go on to the question of head coverings we need to understand clearly the foundation that is seen in v. 3.

Paul, in this verse, gives us the principle with a threefold statement. It is clear that this is a universal principle and that principle involves headship or authority and submission to authority. It is a principle that pervades everything. The entire universe depends on this principle – *read v. 3 again.*

And, the principle of headship and submission is absolutely critical - to the family, and to our very salvation. John MacArthur states it like this:

*“Think of it this way: if Christ does not submit to the Father, then redemption is not accomplished. Man is lost; he is doomed; and God is at war with Himself if the Son does not submit. If man, on the other hand, does not submit to Christ, then man is lost. His destiny is denied, and judgment falls on him. If woman does not submit to man in the family, the family is shattered, and society is wrecked.”*

Authority and submission, headship and respect – that is a principle that permeates the entire universe. Submission to authority does not make one of less value or worth. Why is it that people think that asking a woman to submit to her husband means that she is somehow inferior

to him? If that were true, then by the same argument, Christ's submission to the Father would mean that he is then inferior to the Father. And we know that cannot be true. This is not about worth or importance or significance. It is about roles and structure of authority in the Godhead, in the church and in the family. Without a structure of authority there is chaos.

So that is the principle – headship and submission. But how does that play out in the culture in which we live? That is what Paul addresses next to the Corinthian believers.

## Applying the Principle in the Culture vv. 4-6

*Read vv. 4-6* – the biggest question that arises regarding these verses is whether the idea of head coverings for women is a cultural application, or a truth that is to be applied universally across every culture and time period. I begin this section with a few observations.

1. I have read a number of sermons and expositions of this passage and have found there is no real consensus on this question. I think it is safe to say that we cannot be too dogmatic about the issue. (*Mention the difference in opinion between John MacArthur and Bob Deffinbaugh.*)
2. It is easy to get caught up on the question of whether women should wear something on their heads in church and miss the more significant point in the passage.
3. There are some thoughts here that bear some clarification. First the head cover – Paul was not referring to a hat. The cover he speaks of would probably been more like a shawl, which covered the entire head except for the face. Second, there is nothing in this passage to suggest that Paul is talking about worship in the church. We easily assume that, but it is not stated. He simply refers to praying and prophesying wherever that may have happened publicly. In fact, if you look over to chapter 14, Paul indicated that women were not to be involved in that kind of ministry in the public meetings of the church body.

Having said all that, what can we say about this question? I believe we need to stick to the basic truths in this passage. The first is the

principle that we have already discussed – headship and submission. The husband is the head of the wife – not better, not superior, but given the role of headship. Paul expand on these roles and the reason for them in vv. 8-9 - *read them*. God made Adam first, and gave him the responsibility to care for the world he had created. Then he made Eve, as a helper for Adam. The woman was created to serve under the headship of the man. (You may not like that, but I didn't say it, God did.)

But that brings us to the second key principle, which is the importance of the distinction between the role of men and women and how that distinction is displayed in our culture.

Look at verse 10 – *read it*. Because of the roles of authority and submission, the Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, reminds us that the submission of the woman should be evident by her dress.

It is really hard to know all of what went on in the culture in Corinth or what was happening in the church there. But it seems that in their culture a woman demonstrated her modesty and her submission and her femininity by having her head covered in public. That was her way of showing respect and honor to her husband and to say to others that she was under the authority of her husband.

It also seems that perhaps the society in Corinth was also being affected by the feminist movement back then. There were those who wanted to throw off the idea of submission and advocated ridding themselves of the veil or shawl as a symbol of their rebellion. Tied in with that is the fact that the immoral woman, the prostitutes of the day, would have their heads uncovered and their hair down.

So, Paul says, because of the customs of your culture, you need to have your head covered as a symbol of authority, a way of showing that you are under the authority of your husband. It seems to me that the specific instruction regarding a head covering is a cultural command.

In our culture, wearing a hat or a veil is not any kind of symbol of submission, so it does not accomplish the same purpose as it did in Corinth in the first century. Let me also remind you that in NT times in the Jewish culture it was the men who wore a shawl over their heads when praying, not the women. So different cultures have different customs.

Let me bring out one more aspect that I believe is tied into this whole discussion. If there are different roles of authority and submission for men and women, then there needs to be a clear distinction between the two and an acceptance of that distinction. This where we see a great problem in our society today.

We live in a society that has blurred the distinction between the sexes. The issues of gender confusion and transgenderism have destroyed the distinction between men and women. We live in a unisex world. We have men who want to be women and women who want to be men. And we have those who suggest that our children need to be given the opportunity to decide if they want to be male or female, rather than accepting and living out the role that God gave them by the way he made them.

When that gender confusion and role confusion comes into the church we have chaos and disorder. Paul addressed this same confusion 2000 years ago in the church in Corinth.

## Conclusion

How can we summarize these thoughts? I am sharing this summary from another message I read this week... two key thoughts:

First, we need to understand that there is no place in the church for unisex. There is a difference between males and females – God the creator made it that way. We are not the same, and we are not supposed to be the same. Men are supposed to look like men and women like women. God has also created us for different roles. These God-created distinctions between men and women need to be honored in the church. To blur them is to bring chaos and shame upon the church.

Second, at the same time, we need to understand the mutual interdependence of the sexes. Both sexes are equally special and valuable in God's sight. Both sexes need each other. We complement each other. Just because God has granted the leadership role to males in no way makes them better, nor gives them permission to dominate. (vv. 11-12)

So, whatever your view on women's head coverings, let us not try to rub out the line between men and women. Let us live out the role God has made us for.